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## AN EXPERIMENT IN RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATION

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LAURENS HICKOK SEELYE  
Beirut, Syria

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This article gives an account of the way in which the students of different religious faiths are enabled to co-operate religiously in the American University at Beirut, Syria. The constitution of the West Hall Brotherhood is given in full. It is a significant expression of the spirit of religious co-operation in a Christian institution.

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"Children, I am sorry to say that the Devil gave the heathen in India many religions," was the opening sentence of a missionary pamphlet twenty years ago. Scholars who had been plowing new ground in the comparative study of religions had thrown that rock out long ago. They recognized other ("heathen") religions as equally sincere expressions of man's native impulses to worship, define, and depict the object of his aspiration. But the scientific study of religion was new and not popular; and this more accurate and Christian view of other religions did not spread readily to those who spent fifteen hours a day, devoutly and ardently spreading the cause of Christ in foreign parts. The author of "The Modern Missionary" in a recent number of the *Atlantic Monthly* is one of the few who have a vision of God in terms of the unfamiliar, and at times surprising, practices of the other race's religion. To him the faith of the missionary is not the motive to urge upon others conformity, but a gracious invitation to Christian and non-Christian to learn together of the progressing revelation of God. Dr. Howard Bliss put into actual missionary achievement the belief of every scientific student of religious experience.

It was a radical step. And it is a question how many Christian missionary organizations would tolerate such a creed. But Dr. Bliss declined to accept the leadership of

his institution until it was freed from what little sectarian control existed. The institution became non-denominational, and he shouldered the responsibility of winning miscellaneous support for a liberal, non-sectarian missionary college. Then came his untimely death.

Missionary work in the Near East has never really touched the Moslems. Under the Turks there were government prohibitions, and it was too dangerous for a Moslem to become converted. Some denominations stressed literalistic, doctrinal interpretations, such as the Trinity, in such a way as to arouse the most direct and hostile Moslem antagonism. Even the Jesuits, who have worked for years in many centers of the old Turkish Empire, limit themselves to indirect work. One of the leading fathers of this order, forty years in the land, remarked to me that there was no hope of religious contacts with Islam. "For," said he, "how can one find any common basis with those who won't accept the Fall of Man and man's consequent need of a Saviour?" Much work and many notable educational institutions were built up under the old Turkish régime; but the response to them, for the most part, came from the subject races of the Empire, Armenians, Greeks, etc. The head of a denominational missionary college said frankly, "I'll have to confess that in my ten years of experience out here I have never been able to make educational contact with the Moslems."

In the light of this situation the work of the institution founded by Dr. Daniel Bliss and developed by Dr. Howard Bliss<sup>1</sup> is peculiarly significant. Last year (1920-21) it enrolled 1,001 students divided as follows: Christians, 490; Moslems, 382; Jews, 66; Druzes, 41; Bahais, 32; a total of 511 non-Christians, yet the institution is frankly and openly Christian. That is, its permanent staff of teachers are Christian men, and the regular daily and weekly chapel exercises are conducted by Christians. Far more than that, these figures mean that

<sup>1</sup> American University, Beirut, Syria.

young men who never mingle, play, converse, study, or work together in their home villages or cities, here in this university do *mingle, play, converse, study, and work* together. No one is more surprised at it than they themselves. The varied activities of an American institution necessitate this association. And out of it grow lasting friendships between great-grandsons whose ancestors were ready to massacre each other. So that during the vacations it is no longer strange to find Moslems and Christians on joint hikes, or even living together.

Like most colleges, this institution had a Y.M.C.A. at one time. Gradually, as the increasing association of students vindicated a thoroughgoing faith in Christian friendliness, the test of membership in this organization became more liberal. Associate membership was subject to its usual weakness, testing intellectual conformity rather than spiritual fidelity. So, during the four war years, cut off from the homeland, under pressure and even hostility from the authorities, with difficulty securing maintenance funds on verbal credit, ministering to those who fell starving in the streets alongside the college wall, busy and shorthanded in the administration of education, the association in worship became freer than ever. Shortly after the close of the war it was felt an opportune moment to make explicit the faith of the college in a liberal, non-proselyting association of students and faculty.

This organization was called "The West Hall Brotherhood," because of the location of its place of meeting in West Hall, the center of the students' social, recreational, and religious activities. In preparing a basis for such an organization this alternative was faced:

Either: write into the Pledge the particular and specific views of the institution as a Christian institution, as distinguished from a non-Christian institution. Friends of this plan said that anything other than this would be "untrue to the Christian missionary motive" of the university. Others felt such a plan would not carry out the original intention,

namely to build a genuine association of religious-minded men, with no effort at proselytization. The organization would then be only a liberalized and localized "Christian Association" which the majority of non-Christians either would join from insincere motives, such as currying favor with the faculty, or would decline to join for the reason that subscription to such a pledge demanded disloyalty to their own mighty historic religions.

Or: write the membership basis on the lines of a general theosophical creed, making no reference, in any connection, to the specific religious nature and faith of the institution providing the Brotherhood with its home. On the one hand such a plan would furnish a general, common basis for divergent faiths, and make no proselyting demands upon any member. But on the other hand, if every reference to Christianity were omitted, non-Christian members and others might be justified in thinking the university had abnegated its claim to be a Christian missionary institution.

A middle way was found by making the basis of the Brotherhood consist of a "Preamble" and a "Pledge," which are as follows:

#### THE WEST HALL BROTHERHOOD

*Preamble:* The American University of Beirut is frankly and openly a Christian missionary institution. In Sunday and weekday Chapel services, in curriculum Bible classes, in voluntary devotional Bible classes, it sets forth clearly its conception of the Gospel message to mankind. At the same time it has become widely known for its sympathetic and respectful attitude toward the beliefs and aspirations of its non-Christian students. Rarely in the world's history have thoughtful men of moral purpose yet of widely divergent religious creeds come together in such numbers and in such spirit of mutual understanding and goodwill. No one in the University would wish to lose the benefit of this inter-religious fellowship and harmony that prevails amongst the student body.

The study of our missionary problems and opportunities has led the University to believe that the great need of the Near East today is to join educated men of moral purpose, but of different faiths, in a united

effort to develop those spiritual ideas and tendencies which they experience in common. Through such fellowship and cooperation there will be introduced into all the divergent groups a new spirit of growth in knowledge of the truths and forces which lift our common manhood into a living relationship with the Spirit of God and His work in the world. When students mingle together in this spirit and with this aim, they tend to become more sincere and intelligent in their own religious life and more useful citizens in the communities to which they belong, especially as leaders in the great movements of the new era for the moral reform of all social groups.

The West Hall Brotherhood has been established for the purpose of promoting this type of inter-religious cooperation between those of our students, whatever the differences in their beliefs, who seek to honor God, and who wish to help each other to follow the guidance of His Spirit of truth and service.

This University organization is a brotherhood of earnest students who have banded themselves together in order to help each other to enrich their religious experience and to strengthen their purpose to bring men to live according to the will of God. It is believed that a thoughtful, sincere man, whether Moslem, Bahai, Jew or Christian can join this Brotherhood without feeling that he has compromised his standing in relation to his own religion. In becoming a member, no one, whether Christian or non-Christian, is asked to give up anything which he considers important in his religious beliefs or practices. It is a league of religious men invited to meet together by a Christian University which is trying to apply in this special form the Golden Rule of its Master, Jesus Christ.

We quite sincerely hold that each member of the Brotherhood, whatever his religion, can contribute something to such a united effort and each can gain something from it. We will all come to a better understanding of each other's attitude towards God and man. We can help each other to be more conscientious in our personal lives and more helpful to our fellow-men. In such a gathering it would be out of place to discuss the differences between creeds or to point out what may seem to anyone to be defects in the religious systems to which other members belong.

In establishing such a brotherhood the University is no less Christian and missionary than it has always been, and it conducts these meetings in what it believes to be the spirit of its leader, Jesus Christ, and with the purpose that He always had in view in all His public activities. However, each speaker at our meetings will be free to present any posi-

tive and constructive statement of the supreme forces and principles on which he bases his faith in God and man. The result will be a clearer understanding of the fundamental factors in the religious life of a modern educated man; and more particularly of the ideals and purposes of this University as a Christian University, and of the reasons for its determination to be loyal to Jesus Christ in all that it does for its students and their communities. At the same time the University wishes to make it possible for non-Christians to hold fellowship with us in the spirit of utmost self-respect with regard to their own convictions and group relationships. This is not a new thing in the history of the University, but has always been the spirit of our student religious meetings.

The entire Brotherhood meets every Friday evening, and smaller groups meet on Sunday mornings. Some of these smaller gatherings are for the purpose of direct Bible study, others for the presentation of more general themes of present day importance in the lives of earnest prayerful men.

The practical aim of all these meetings is to emphasize the fact that the supreme need today is for men of character; and that the time is ripe for men of all races and religions to cooperate in the use of everything—thought, energy, possession, and social relationships—in the construction, under God's blessing, of a world of righteousness and human brotherhood.

Through the agency of various committees the members of the Brotherhood are given an opportunity to put these principles into practice in the life of the campus. Thus we hope to come to a better understanding of each other's attitude towards God and also of God's purpose for the world. We will at the same time be forming habits of dependence on God and of unselfish service to our fellow-men.

*Pledge:* In joining the West Hall Brotherhood I am in sympathy with its purpose as expressed in the Preamble.

I desire to take my part in this united movement for righteousness and human brotherhood; and with God's help I am determined to rid my life of the obstacles and habits which interfere with this purpose of living a sincere, clean, honest and serviceful life.

As a practical aid in keeping this determination strong I expect to practice meditation and private devotion, and also to attend the Friday evening meetings.

I will take part in any work of the committees in which I can be of service.

Thus, in the Pledge, no man joining the Brotherhood is required to "become Christian"; and, by the Preamble, all grounds are removed for thinking that the University has given up its faith as a Christian missionary institution or has become merely a society for the cultivation of ethical emotion.

What is probably the most remarkable proposition is the explicit statement in the Preamble that the institution inaugurates this Brotherhood for all religions not as an indication that it has substituted a general, universal religious philosophy for its historic Christianity, but because *religious association constitutes the true nature of Christianity*. In such a situation, with such students, the Christian thing to do is not so much to "make them Christians" as to provide a way of learning from God by common prayer, song, testimony, and worship. The only way to make the spirit of Christ supreme throughout the world is to practice the spirit of friendship, holding back and hiding nothing, and taking a chance on the results which that spirit will accomplish. At least such is the faith that founded the West Hall Brotherhood.